

COME – TOUR WITH ME



by Deidamia Osborn Bettencourt

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COME – TOUR WITH ME

By

D. Osborn Bettencourt



Mill Stone Steps at front door.

You may walk or drive, you may come by taxi, bus or bicycle, but you do eventually arrive at the Dukes County Historical Society in Edgartown. The grounds and buildings are at the corner of School and Cooke Sts. These two streets were not always so named. Many years ago School was called Maple Street, and Cooke was called Commercial, because much of the hauling of whale oil from the ships and supplies to the docks was done on this same street.

There are three entrances to the fenced grounds, two are on School St., or you may enter through the swinging gate on the Cooke Street side. If you are walking you will see a sign on a white painted fence, indicating that this is indeed the entrance to the museum. The grounds are beautifully kept with many unusual trees, an herb garden and lovely flowers. There is a 12 room house, a carriage-shed, a replica of a whaleships try-works, a brick tower which houses the Fresnel lens from Gay Head, and a museum library.

The two stone steps at the front door of the house are mill stones, and came from a mill that stood where the Santos house is today, at the corner of Planting Field Way and Mill Street.

COME INSIDE

The front door is open, and you enter a small hall. Directly in front of you is a rack holding several whalebone canes and walking sticks, all carved in the most intriguing designs, a crouching fox, a clenched hand, a horses leg and hoof, and others. Hanging directly above is an ancient Revere type lantern. Also quite conspicuous is a round wooden keg, painted a vivid orange, with DONATIONS painted in black letters (a gentle hint to the public). This was done by an interested summer visitor who is a member of the Society.

Now if you turn left, you may come tour with me. Do come in and sign the guest book and I will tell you about the house.

BUILT IN 1765

Squire Thomas Cooke who was second collector of customs for Dukes County had the house built in 1765. He was Justice of the Peace as well, and he lived here with his wife, Abigail Coffin. They had 14 children, seven of whom lived to maturity.

At the time the house was built there was nothing between it and the harbor, the ships could be seen coming and going from these windows, many of which still have the original hand blown glass panes.



Customs Office.

CAMBER BUILT

The house was built by ship's carpenters, and they built it the same way they built a ship, with the deck slanting away from the main mast, just as the four corners of this house all slant away from the main chimney.

It is called a camber construction, and it gives added strength where there is stress. The word camber means a convex curving, a

slight arching, and is used today on the wings of planes, on bridges, on skis, and the front end of cars. This is thought to be one of three houses in Massachusetts today with this same type of construction. Undoubtedly many houses at the time were built the same way, but when the houses changed hands the new owners thought the carpenters had made a mistake, and had it all torn out and squared off. You will notice the paneling throughout the house, the door frames, ceiling, floors and fireplaces all have a definite slant. The wall papers are reproductions of a type popular in an older day.

FROM VINEYARD HOMES

The furnishings in the house are all from Vineyard homes, and the portraits are of Vineyard people, some are by Cyrus Worth Pease and Edward Dalton Marchant of Edgartown. The other portraits are unsigned and the artist unknown.

This room was the Customs Office, and as such got a great deal of usage so the floor has been replaced, the others however, are the original floors.

When a whaler was about to sail, the captain would come here to get his clearance-paper or sea-letter. Above the desk is a clearance paper written in Spanish, French, English and Dutch, as the seamen whaled in those waters. It is signed by Abraham Lincoln.

On either side of the door you will see two portraits, one is of Capt. Richard Luce, the other is his wife. Capt. Luce was from Holmes Hole (Vineyard Haven), and a very successful whaling captain. He never lost a ship, a spar or man, but his three sons sailed and were lost at sea.

CAPTAIN'S GIFT

The inlaid mother of pearl box on the applewood desk, has the initials A. B. L. on the cover and stand for Abigail Bradford Luce. Capt. Luce had this box made in China while he was whaling in the Pacific, as a gift for his daughter. When he brought it home and he saw her for the first time she was 3 years old. Also on the desk is a very old ear trumpet, formerly owned by a captain's widow. It is as effective today as it was years ago, just a bit more cumbersome perhaps, than a Modern Hearing Aid.

You will notice the grandfather clock is still working, and to the

left is a Hitchcock rocking bench with a guard rail, the open space at one end was for the mother to sit and rock the baby leaving her hands free to sew. At the fireplace is a foot warmer, and warming pan, necessary items in those times. Also a corner chair, originally from the Old Mayhew house.

On a small table are several whales teeth of different sizes, all polished and set in Polynesian wood, made by a whaleman as a gift to his wife, to let her know he was thinking of her even though they were far apart. On another table there is a beautiful shell basket under a glass dome, it was brought home from the South Sea Islands in 1857.

EARLY LIVING

Now we will go into the kitchen-dining room. Two elderly ladies lived in this house until 1932 with no heat, electricity or running water. They used the fireplaces for heat and cooking and had outside plumbing. You will notice the bee-hive oven to the left of the fireplace, and the dish cupboard on the right. The pantry is used to display our lovely china, consisting of Flowing Blue, English Chintz, Staffordshire, Canton and others. At one side of the dining room table is a red painted Chinese bride's chest, brought home by a whaling captain for his bride to be. On the candle stand nearby is a black lacquer tray with tiny red cinnabar cups and saucers. These were called tea-tasters. Before a captain would buy any tea, he would have to sample all the different kinds that were offered. The Queen Ann highboy at the end of the room was made from pieces of mahogany that drifted ashore from a ship wrecked off South Beach. On the wall are a brace of heath hen. They have been extinct in the United States since 1932. The heath hen was a low brush bird and spring fires caused the death of many. They also were hunted by other animals and by humans.

CHILDREN'S DELIGHT

Off the dining room is a small room which could have been the borning room. Today it is called the children's room. In it are many things to delight a small child. Dolls, little chairs, a tiny piano, cradle, high chair and bed, a school bench with slates and books, a school master's desk, and a leather spanker from Davis Academy, besides old interesting maps and pictures.



Dining Room.

SUMMER KITCHEN

This kitchen was added to the old house at a later date, and when both doors are open at either side in the summer, one can understand why it was more pleasant to do the cooking out here.

Today this room contains many unusual articles. Among them are a Civil War surgeons kit, a breast hook timber from the ship Constitution, a number of duck decoys, and items brought up by divers from the wreck of the *Port Hunter*. She was bound for Europe with supplies for our soldiers during World War I, and went down in Vineyard Sound. There is also a spy-glass, a gift from the German Kaiser to Josiah Daggett of Edgartown, for his assistance to the distressed ship *Lohengrin* in November 1881. There are swords and guns, an old apple parer, waffle iron, lemon squeezer, egg-beater, butter churn and coffee mill. The ship model on the mantle is of the U. S. revenue cutter *Gallatin*. She patrolled the coast from Edgartown to New Hampshire, and was famous in rescue work. Madame Chiang Kai-shek's father shipped on her when he was sixteen years old and was frequently seen in Edgartown and referred to as "that little China boy."

HISTORIC TABLE

A small table, called General Grant's Table, was used by him on the steamer *Monohansett*, which was taken by the Government as a Dispatch Boat during the Civil War. After the close of the war the steamer was returned to regular service between the islands with Capt. Charles Smith in command, and the table passed into his hands. After his death it became the property of his wife Abigail Baylies Smith, who also inherited the beautiful oil painting of the *Monohansett* which now hangs in our museum library. Both the table and the painting were given to the M. V. Chapter DAR Historical Society as a memorial to her, by her nephew, Abram F. Marchant.

Off the kitchen is the work shop, containing a loom, and many old tools and other items in use long ago.

Now we will retrace our steps, through the dining room to the Curio room. Here you will see Sandwich glass, Indian artifacts, a



Parlor.

curved brick mold, vases made from Gay Head clay, a shell box, made by a whaler as an engagement present for his sweetheart, and other items including a quarter-board from the *City of Columbus*, wrecked off Gay Head in 1894 with a great loss of life.

From the curio room we enter the parlor, with its horse hair sofa and chairs. Here you will notice the definite slant over the doorway, the ceiling, floor and fireplace. Near the fireplace are two chairs with a candle-holder attached to the backs. These were the reading lights of yesteryear. There is an 1842 Chickering piano which is kept tuned and ready to be played, some say it sounds much like a harpsichord. On the top of the piano is a violin which was picked up at sea in 21 pieces painstakingly glued together and restrung. There also is a flute which was taken to sea many years ago by a 17 year old boy. Over the mantle is a painting by A. Jacobsen of the first side wheel steamer *Nantucket*, built in 1887. There is a next of tables from China, an inlaid lacquer beauty box, a shell basket, a Japanese tea-caddy, and a stereoptican viewer. Many of the lovely things in the house were brought home by the whalers from voyages to the Far East.

We will now go upstairs to the other six rooms. At the top of the staircase is a table on which a model of the schooner *Mary Ann* is displayed. She was the type used to bring lumber down from Maine, to build the Camp Ground cottages in Oak Bluffs.

WHALING HISTORY

To the left is the first of the two whaling rooms where there is much to see. In a glass case there is a whaleboat, fully equipped and manned, depicting a so called "Nantucket sleigh-ride." Another case has a fully equipped whaleboat, as well as samples of spermacti and ambergris.

Spermacti comes from the whale, and is used in making candles and is used also in cosmetics.

Ambergris which was considered so very valuable, actually came from a sick whale. It was found in the intestines of the whale, and oftentimes floating on the water. It was used in the retaining power of perfume.

There is a model of the *Cape Horn Pigeon* out of New Bedford. On this model you can see the cutting stage which was lowered when a whale was brought along side. The iron head loops at the

top of the mast held two men, back to back, sent aloft to sight the whales. That object on the floor is a piece of the weathered jawbone of a whale. On the desk are maps, quadrants, a spy-glass, whales teeth and a clacker. This clacker resembles a New Year's noise maker. When the captain wished to get the attention of the crew, he would swing this clacker a few times, and it could be heard all over the ship. On the desk is also a picture of a whales tongue, which sometimes yielded as much as 25 barrels of oil. Sperm oil was considered the finest, although oil was taken from other whales as well, and it was only the sperm whale which had teeth, forty in the lower jaw.



1st Whaling Room.

There is a medicine chest which all whaleships carried. The captain was both doctor and dentist as well as navigator. There is a story, that sometimes the bottles in the chest would simply be numbered, instead of naming the contents. One day, one of the crew became sick, and the captain went to get some of number 11. The bottle was empty. So he mixed some of 6 and 5 together; you can choose your own ending to that one. . .

MELVILLE'S NAME

On the wall is the crew list of the whaleship *Acushnet*, which states the names of the crew, their ages, heights, color of hair and complexion, and home town. Herman Melville sailed on the *Acushnet*, and his name is there. He did not complete the voyage however, and it wasn't until many years later that he wrote his famous *Moby Dick*, using the experiences of this voyage for his book. The captain of the *Acushnet* was Valentine Pease of Edgartown, whose house on South Water Street was sometimes referred to as the Capt. "Ahab" house.

There are the portraits of Thomas and Timothy Daggett both whaling captains, also a picture of the 110 whaling captains from Edgartown.

The second whaling room contains many whaling implements, the toggle iron, cutting spade, lance and harpoon. There also is a sea chest, and a captain's portable desk, small, very lovely with its dark blue interior, many compartments and brass handles. Above it is a picture showing Osborn's wharf at the foot of Main St., Edgartown, as it was during the whaling days, with the whaleship *Splendid* tied up, and the many casks of oil on the wharf. The men in the background are: William H. Munroe, Charles Barney, John Potter Fisher, and Henry Pease, 2nd., all of Edgartown. On another wall is a picture of the whaling disaster of 1871, when 31 whaleships from around this area were caught in the ice at the Arctic. Five whaleships went to their rescue, bringing down 1200 men, women and children who had managed to survive until help came. This disaster marked the beginning of the decline of the whaling industry, not only in Edgartown, but New Bedford and Nantucket as well.

FROM THE SOUTH PACIFIC

There are also many articles brought home from the islands where the whalers stopped to take on water, food or recruits. A devils stick made of bamboo was carried by the native women when they went to the river for water. When shaken, it made a strange sound and was supposed to scare away the evil spirits. There is an intricately carved adz, paddle, and a wooden club used to show authority. A grass skirt, a piece of tapa cloth, and a chart

of signal flags. On the door is a very fine drawing of a whaleship, the smaller boat filled with men, harpooning a whale, and the whale itself tossing a small boat into the air, as so often happened.

MIDGET SISTERS

The middle room is a memorial to the midget sisters, Lucy and Sarah Adams who were born in Chilmark. Attractive and talented, they were only 46 and 49 inches tall, perfect in form and proportion described as queenly in bearing and manner. They were two of six children. The others all were of normal size and only one was a boy. When Lucy and Sarah grew up they appeared with Barnum and Bailey Circus in Madison Square Garden. They never danced or played cards or performed on Sundays, for both girls were staunch Methodists. They acted in plays, tableau and religious concerts, and appeared on stages from Providence to San Francisco and Canada. They completely captivated their audiences wherever they appeared. The first 20 years they traveled with a troop of midgets including Mrs. Tom Thumb. They refused an opportunity to appear abroad as it meant they would have had to act on Sundays. This room contains many of their things, including some of their clothing, a little rocking chair and a doll, which was used in their act, a melodeon which was taken with them wherever they traveled, a spinning wheel and cane. Sarah was the smaller, and a year and a half younger than her sister Lucy. Neither sister married, though there is a picture of their rejected midget suitors on the wall. They were descendants of John Quincy Adams. Sarah died at the age of 75, and Lucy lived to be 93.

OLD TIME COSTUMES

We also have a costume room, where many of the period dresses are displayed. Among them is a lovely ivory silk wedding dress worn by a girl who left the island the day after her marriage with her husband for the west coast, there to take ship from California on a whaling voyage to the Arctic. We have the bearskin jacket she wore while there, also a picture of her in Japanese dress, taken while she was in Japan. She chose to accompany her captain husband on this voyage, as many wives did in those years.

We also have beautiful Chinese silk shawls, brought home by the whalers, a very old calico dress, military uniforms, a beaded fringed leather jacket, baby dresses, hats, quilts, and a pair of white kid high button shoes made in Paris.

CAMP GROUND DAYS

The Camp Ground room is furnished as the Oak Bluffs cottages were in the 1870's. There is a picture showing the tents which were first pitched at the Camp Ground meetings, and later as the tents were replaced by cottages, as close together as the tents had been. There is a picture of President Grant as a guest at one of the cottages. The chair on which he sat, his spittoon, and tent lanterns are a part of the rooms furnishings. On the organ is a 1955 copy of the Saturday Evening Post showing the Camp Ground cottages and how they look on Illumination night, when hundreds of Japanese lanterns are strung from house to house and lit as soon as darkness falls. The article also shows the Tabernacle, where summer meetings, concerts, and even the graduation exercises of the Regional High School are given.

DEXTER BEDROOM



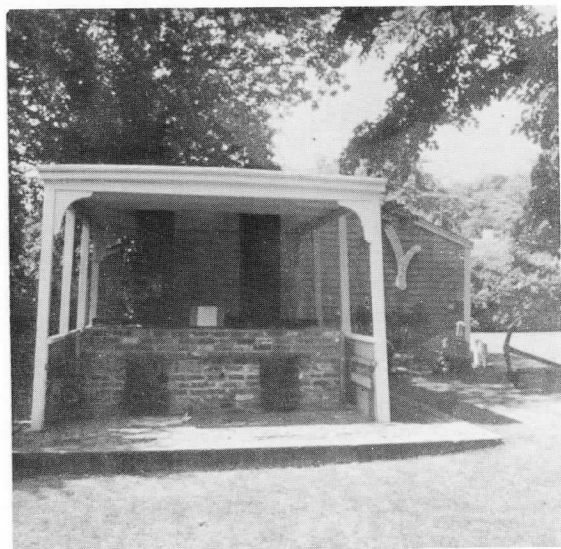
Colonial Bedroom.

Now we enter the only room in the house furnished as a bedroom. Everything, with the exception of the spinning wheel, is a memorial to Thomas Nevin Jernegan Dexter, the young man in the

portrait. He was a native son, and a descendant of Thomas Mayhew. He died in his early 30's, and his grandmother had everything in his bedroom brought over here as a memorial to him.

On the table is a whalebone swift, used as a yarn winder. Under the four poster bed is a trundle bed with rope springs. The key winders were used to tighten up the ropes when they became loosened. The cradle at the foot of the bed was put to good use last summer, when a couple put their baby in it while they toured the rooms.

TRY WORKS REPLICA



Replica of Try-works.

We now will go outside to see a replica of a whaleships try-works. The try-pots were set in a brick furnace on the forward section of the ship. These two large iron pots could hold as much as 250 gals. of oil. After the blubber was cut from the whale it was put into these pots and "tried out" or boiled down. The oil was then bailed out and put into a large copper cooling tank, usually right next to the try-works. Later it was funneled into casks and stored in the ships hold. You may ask why it didn't get hot

enough to start a fire. The deck was insulated by a foot high trough filled with sea water, called a goose-pen.

NANCY'S PETS

We will pause a moment at these two gravestones. Before you start feeling too sad as you read the inscriptions, I must tell you, they are gravestones for chickens. As you can see one chicken lived to be 12 years old, a ripe old age for a chicken, wouldn't you agree? The wording on the stones was composed by Nancy Luce to whom the chickens belonged.

Nancy was born in Tisbury where she lived with her parents on their farm. At one time they were people of moderate means. Nancy dressed well, and had her own horse which she rode over the countryside. The story is told that she became engaged to a young seaman, and plans were made for their marriage on his return from a voyage. But he never returned. The terse message reached Nancy. "Lost at sea." She was completely overcome with grief. It was after this tragic news that Nancy withdrew from outside contacts to devote all her time and energy to her aging parents and the upkeep of the farm. She worked hard, then suddenly her parents were gone, and she was alone except for her animals. She acquired a goat, thinking to lavish her love on it, then it died. She did have a cow, and then some chickens. The cow she named Sarah. She was a gentle cow, and would come to the kitchen door to be milked when she heard Nancy stirring in the morning. Later she had another cow which she named Red Cannon. Red because of the color, and cannon because every time she bellowed it sounded like a cannon. That cow Nancy didn't like, she said she was "purely stubborn" at times, and would break the fence, and buck her.

A LONELY LIFE

She loved her chickens, and she made pets of them, talked to them, wrote poems to them. These special ones she loved more than the rest, and kept them in the house with her. When they died she had these stones made for them. The other chickens she kept in the cellar, each had its own roost with a separate draw curtain. On each of the eggs Nancy sold was the name of the chicken who had laid it. The money helped to support her, as well

as the many pairs of stockings she knit and sold. She also sold her poems and pictures of herself. Less sympathetic people teased Nancy, and were sometimes mean to her, but others who came to know her respected her knowledge of chickens, and would ask her advice on their care.

After her death at the age of 70, a loaded double and single barrel pistol were found in her locked desk, which she kept in case of prowlers, or ill bred people who continued to annoy her. She specified in her will, that after her death, her chickens were to have their heads cut off, and their remains to be buried beside her. She didn't want them to live and have people cruel to them.

FROM ANOTHER DAY

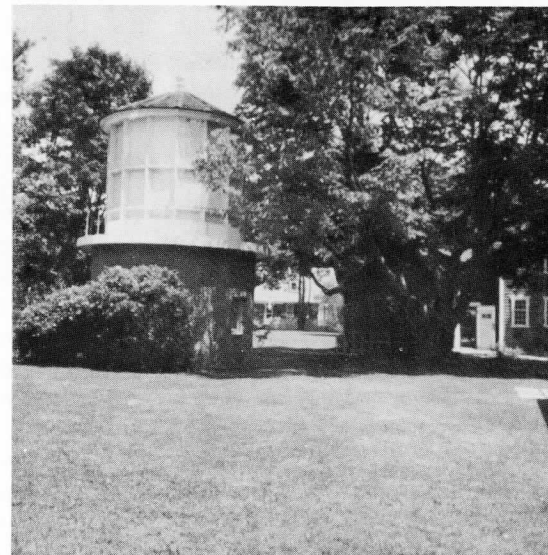
The nearby building is the carriage shed. Here you will see the headlight from the old "Active" the train which ran from Oak Bluffs wharf to Edgartown and on down to Katama and to Mattakesset Lodge. It was in operation from 1874 to 1896. Coming down from Oak Bluffs the tracks were laid so close to the beach that repairs had to be made after every storm. It traveled at the break neck speed of 12 miles an hour, making a powerful noise, which often scared the cows and horses grazing in surrounding fields.

There also is a peddle cart in the carriage shed, a baby carriage of the 1890 vintage, surf boards from Hawaii, a racing whaleboat, a Noman's Land boat, an Eskimo kyak, a binnacle, ship models, and the Button Fire Engine (dated 1854) and given to the Society in 1937 by the Town of Edgartown.

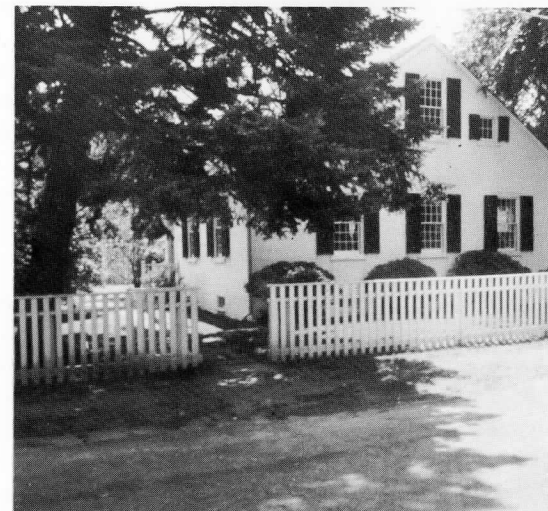
FROM GAY HEAD

The 15 foot brick tower in the yard was built to house the Fresnel lens from the Gay Head Lighthouse. When the lights became automatic along the coast it was brought down here. This lens was invented by Augustin Fresnel, a Frenchman, in 1814, was exhibited in Paris, then brought to America. It has 1008 polished crown glass prisms, and has a clock work mechanism. When the lens arrived at Edgartown it took an ox cart with 40 oxen to get it to Gay Head where it was installed in a 41 foot tower, and had to be wound four times during the night. A whale oil lamp was first used for lighting, later kerosene, and the light could be seen for 20 miles at sea. You might see a similar lens in other museums, but

they are not operable. This light is in actual operation on Sunday nights during the summer months, when it slowly revolves, flashing 3 whites and a red.



Lens from Gay Head.



School St. Entrance.

RESEARCH LIBRARY

The white, museum library building, was built about 18 years ago. It houses our collection of almost two thousand volumes, on history, law, religion, medicine, Indians, whaling and genealogy.

The glass cases contain not only whales teeth, but many scrimshaw articles which were made from whalebone, such as napkin ring holders, knitting needles, jaggings wheels, a swift, a folding pocket tooth pick, canes and busks. Another case contains beautifully scrimshawed walrus tusks, one with a likeness of Mary Todd Lincoln, the other of Martha Washington, a cribbage board made in the Arctic, a miniature Eskimo kyak, fully equipped and manned ready for sealing, a pair of scrimshawed porpoise jaws, dated 1886, from the Bark *Mary Frazier*, owned by Samuel Osborn, Jr. of Edgartown from 1876 to 1887. Some of you may want to know what the word scrimshaw means. It is the decorating



Museum Library.

or ornamentation done on wood or bone. A knife, a nail or needle was used to etch the design and india ink or native dyes provided the coloring. It helped wile away the many hours when the whalemen were not catching whales.

There are wooden whaling stamps which were often used on the margins of whaling logs, so that one could tell by a glance at the page how many whales were caught or lost for the day.

At the fireplace is a line gun and breeches buoy, used by the Coast Guard in rescue work around the Island. A nightwatchman's lantern that held a whale oil lamp, fire buckets, a piece of jig saw work, a beautiful sample of similar work carved on the Camp Ground cottages. Another case contains a detailed model of a whaleship, complete even to the stove boat on the deck.

FOR GAMBLERS

Beneath this case is a small bicycle in a glass case. This is an old time slot-machine, once used in Fred Bunker's ice cream parlor, on Main St., Edgartown. Both wheels are numbered, the slot at the side took nickels, the bell would ring, a lever would be tipped and the wheels spun around. If they both stopped on the same number, the men won a cigar. If the ladies won, they received an ice cream cone. Needless to say this gambling device was kept in the back room of the ice cream parlor.

On the fireplace wall you will notice a framed photograph of a six masted schooner, the *Mertie B. Crowley*. She was grounded on Wasque Shoal off South Beach, on January 22, 1910. Thirteen members of the crew with the Captain and his wife, were rescued by Capt. Levi Jackson, after spending a horrifying night lashed to the rigging and crosstrees in freezing weather. The daring and bravery of Capt. Jackson and his crew, all of Edgartown, was rewarded with the Carnegie medal.

AROUND THE WORLD

Our most recent acquisition to the Society is the glass enclosed model of the *Spray* you will see on a table. She was a derelict oyster sloop given to Capt. Joshua Slocum. He spent 13 months rebuilding her, using only the best and strongest of wood, spending \$553.62 for the material. When she was completed she looked exactly as you see this model. It had been Joshus Slocum's intention to some day sail alone around the world, and now it became a

reality. He was 51 years old when he sailed from Boston on April 24, 1895 in his 36 foot 9 inch sloop. It took him sometime to adjust to the loneliness, but at night he lashed the helm, and the vessel held her course while he went below to sleep. It was some three years later in July 1898 that he finally dropped anchor in Fairhaven, Mass. He had done what no man had done before, sailed alone around the world. In November of 1909, he sailed from Tisbury alone, and was never heard from again.

On the top of another case a hand carved duck decoy sits complacently, near a beautiful inlaid Swiss music box, which is almost a hundred years old, and was made in Switzerland. It plays 12 different tunes, and was a gift to the Society a few years ago.

On the shelves near the door is the literature that is sold here, including our quarterly publication, the *Intelligencer*, always so full of island lore. Only material published or sponsored by the Society is on sale. We also sell postcards and slides showing the interior of the Cooke House.

There are order blanks listing our publications which you may have, as well as membership application blanks, should you decide to become a member of the Dukes County Historical Society, and we hope you will. As a member of the Society you will receive the *Intelligencer* in February, May, August and November.

Our tour ends here, and I hope you have enjoyed it as much as I have.



Cooke St. Entrance.

